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ABSTRACT

During each fall quarter, some of the freshman English sections at Georgia Institute of Technology are taught by an experimental track method. The mechanics of English composition are categorized into specific areas of competence; these categories form the basis for three tracks, taught simultaneously throughout the quarter. Students are assigned to that track in which their writing reveals them to be most deficient; at the end of each ten-week cycle, students are retested and may be reassigned to the same track or assigned to a different one. In evaluative questionnaires completed by students, 78% of students have indicated preference for the track method over the regular lecture method. In an effort to evaluate the approach analytically, a study was made to determine whether students taught by this method in the first quarter of freshman English would earn higher grades in the second quarter than would students taught by the traditional method. Analysis of the results indicated that students taught by the track approach tended to be better prepared for the second quarter course and that the track method is equally effective with students of verbal ability above or below the median of their peers. (GW)

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A Track Approach to English Instruction

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English teachers, like instructors in other fields, continue their ceaseless efforts to improve their methods (1). During the last few years, instruction has been individualized (2), broken into group conferences (3), augmented with mechanical paraphenalia (4), approached from a systems standpoint (5), handled by peers (6), even non-taught (7). Evaluative attempts of these various methods have run the gamut from subjective to analytical, with time scales ranging from one term to two years (8, 9).

This note describes Georgia Tech's experimental track approach to teaching English and the evaluation method devised to test it. The analytical evaluation is based on the premise that if the track method is better than the regular lecture method, then students taught the first quarter of freshman English by the track method will tend to earn higher grades in the second quarter of freshman English than students taught by the traditional method.

The track method of teaching freshman English was introduced at Tech in the fall of 1971. Three faculty members have

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participated in a team effort utilizing the method each subsequent fall. The subject matter covered is identical to that covered in the more traditional freshman English classes, that is, writing about short stories. Thus the only difference is in teaching technique. The experimental sections, which are only offered fall quarter each year, are given no special designation in course-offering pamphlets. Most of the students in the experimental sections are first quarter freshmen. Thus it seems reasonable to assume random student selection.

To begin with, the mechanics of English composition were categorized into six areas of competence. These are: coherence, idea development, grammar/punctuation, interpretation, sentence structure, and spelling/diction. These categories form the basis for three simultaneous tracks of two week sessions throughout the quarter. On the first day of class each student registered with a participating teacher is tested and then assigned to a track, which deals with his weakness. Each track concentrates on one of the six categories, and each student is assigned by the teaching team to that track in which his writing reveals him to be most deficient. In the last meeting of each two week session, the three subsections or tracks meet together either to

discuss a preassigned short story or to work on an assigned essay. These combined sessions are designed to provide the student with a unified view of the course components. Each student is retested at the end of each ten-week cycle and is then assigned to the track which deals with his demonstrated need. The process continues throughout the quarter. The principal rationale behind this approach is that it enables a student to participate in, and even repeat, an area in which he demonstrates competence.

Comments from interviews with students who took their first quarter of English by the track method have been overwhelmingly favorable. Some typical comments are: "The experimental method is much more interesting than the other." "With the variety of teachers each week you do not suffer from boredom." "I definitely believe that the experimental class is a great help for the entering freshman in that individual assistance on individual problems is provided." "The experimental program seems to offer a more rounded program than the average single teacher is likely to offer."

At the end of each quarter in which this method of teaching is utilized, all students involved are asked to complete an evaluative questionnaire. The questionnaires indicate that most students consider the small subsections with attention

concentrated on a particular category to be the most effective aspect of the course, and the sessions where all subgroups meet together as least effective. Seventy-eight percent of the students responding to these questionnaires indicated a preference for the track method compared with regular lecture.

In an effort to evaluate the approach in a more analytical manner, the following design was utilized. Each experimental student who completed English 1001 by the track method was matched with a control student who completed 1001 by the regular method. Each pair met the following criteria: the students took English 1001 simultaneously during their first quarter at Georgia Tech; they were in the same English 1002 class during their second quarter at Georgia Tech; their verbal SAT scores matched as closely as possible.

In this manner 126 experimental-control pairs were formed. These pairs were then examined to determine whether any significant difference exists in the grades made in English 1002 by experimental and control students. The experimental member made a higher grade in 50 pairs (39.7%); the members made the same grade in 44 pairs (34.9%), and the control member made a higher grade in 32 pairs (25.4%). In order to determine whether the 50 pair-32 pair difference is statistically significant, the collected data were subjected to the sign test.

Significance was indicated at the 90% confidence level (10).

Another question of interest with regard to the foregoing experiment is whether any difference exists in the effectiveness of the experimental method in teaching students with high verbal SAT scores as compared to those with low verbal SAT scores. To investigate this question, the student pairs were classified both according to whether the experimental or control student made a higher grade in English 1002 and according to whether the experimental member of the pair had a verbal SAT score above or below the median value for Georgia Tech freshmen in 1971-72, the first year of the experiment. A chi square analysis was then applied to the two-way classification. The expected distribution was based on the hypothesis that no difference exists in the effectiveness of the experimental method in teaching students with verbal SAT scores above and below the median. The difference between observed and expected distributions was not sufficiently large to reject the hypothesis of no difference in teaching effectiveness for students having verbal SAT scores below as compared with students having verbal SAT scores abcve the median for their class.

Three conclusions result from the above study: (1) Students have an overwhelmingly favorable opinion of the method. This is undoubtedly due, in part, to tailoring the course to each student's greatest need within the defined categories. (2) Students taught the first quarter of freshman English by this track approach tend to be better prepared for the second quarter course. In the second quarter emphasis is shifted from writing about short stories to writing about drama. Composition, however, is central to both English 1001 and 1002. (3) The track method is equally effective with students having verbal ability both above and below the median of their peers. This finding supports the contention that regardless of level, bad habits, once formed, can be erased only by constant pressure as good habits are practised in their place. The track method seems to provide an effective mechanism for finding bad habits and concentrating on their correction.

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